

## Into the Wild, Chapter 11 Chesapeake Beach

Chris's relations with his parents, which had been unusually courteous since his graduation from high school, deteriorated significantly that summer, and Walt and Billie had no idea why. According to Billie, "He seemed mad at us more often, and he be-came more withdrawn—no, that's not the right word. Chris wasn't ever *withdrawn*. But he wouldn't tell us what was on his mind and spent more time by himself."

Chris's smoldering anger, it turns out, was fueled by a discovery he'd made two summers earlier, during his cross-country wanderings. When he arrived in California, he'd visited the El Segundo neighborhood where he'd spent the first six years of his life. He called on a number of old family friends who still lived there, and from their answers to his queries, Chris pieced together the facts of his father's previous marriage and subsequent divorce—facts to which he hadn't been privy.

Walt's split from his first wife, Marcia, was not a clean or amicable parting. Long after falling in love with Billie, long after she gave birth to Chris, Walt continued his relationship with Marcia in secret, dividing his time between two households, two families. Lies were told and then exposed, begetting more lies to explain away the initial deceptions. Two years after Chris was born, Walt fathered another son—Quinn McCandless—with Marcia. When Walt's double life came to light, the revelations inflicted deep wounds. All parties suffered terribly.

Eventually, Walt, Billie, Chris, and Carine moved to the East Coast. The divorce from Marcia was at long last finalized, allowing Walt and Billie to legalize their marriage. They all put the turmoil behind them as best they could and carried on with their lives. Two decades went by. Wisdom accrued. The guilt and hurt and jealous fury receded into the distant past; it appeared that the storm had been weathered. And then in 1986, Chris drove out to El Segundo, made the rounds of the old neighborhood, and learned about the episode in all its painful detail. "Chris was the sort of person who brooded about things," Carine observes. "If something bothered him, he wouldn't come right out and say it. He'd keep it to himself, harboring his resentment, letting the bad feelings build and build." That seems to be what happened following the discoveries he made in El Segundo.

Children can be harsh judges when it comes to their parents, disinclined to grant clemency, and this was especially true in Chris's case. More even than most teens, he tended to see things in black and white. He measured himself and those around him by an impossibly rigorous moral code.

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After Chris unearthed the particulars of Walt's divorce, two years passed before his anger began to leak to the surface, but leak it eventually did. The boy could not pardon the mistakes his father had made as a young man, and he was even less willing to pardon the attempt at concealment. He later declared to Carine and others that the deception committed by Walt and Billie made his "entire childhood seem like a fiction." But he did not confront his parents with what he knew, then or ever. He chose instead to make a secret of his dark knowledge and express his rage obliquely, in silence and sullen withdrawal.

In 1988, as Chris's resentment of his parents hardened, his sense of outrage over injustice in the world at large grew. That summer, Billie remembers, "Chris started complaining about all the rich kids at Emory." More and more of the classes he took addressed such pressing social issues as racism and world hunger and inequities in the distribution of wealth.

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In the spring of 1990, when Walt, Billie, and Carine attended Chris's graduation ceremony, they thought he seemed happy. As they watched him stride across the stage and take his diploma, he was grinning from ear to ear. He indicated that he was planning another extended trip but implied that he'd visit his family in Annandale before hitting the road. Shortly thereafter, he donated the balance of his bank account to OXFAM, loaded up his car, and vanished from their lives. From then on he scrupulously avoided contacting either his parents or Carine, the sister for whom he purportedly cared immensely.

"We were all worried when we didn't hear from him," says Carine, "and I think my parents' worry was mixed with hurt and anger. But I didn't really feel hurt by his failure to write. I knew he was happy and doing what he wanted to do; I understood that it was important for him to see how independent he could be. And he knew that if he'd written or called me, Mom and Dad would find out where he was, fly out there, and try to bring him home."